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Deposited in DRO:

12 April 2012

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Hunter, David J. (2011) 'Memoirs of New Labour's NHS Chief (review of the week).', British medical journal., 343 . d6579.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.d6579>

Publisher's copyright statement:

This article has been accepted for publication in the British medical journal. The definitive copyedited, typeset version Hunter, David J. (2011) 'Memoirs of New Labour's NHS Chief (review of the week).', British medical journal., 343 . d6579 is available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.d6579>

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Book Review

24 Hours to Save the NHS

Nigel Crisp

Oxford University Press

ISBN 978 0 19 963995 3

The title is the raciest thing about this book. Anyone looking for a kiss and tell expose of the rise and fall of the NHS CEO who presided over successive waves of reform under New Labour at its most testosterone-charged will be disappointed. This is a measured, selective and understated account of six years of continuous reform.

While some of New Labour's changes, notably the focus on health improvement and leadership, are to be commended, many of them, in particular the growing obsession with choice and competition, are either gratuitous or based on ideology masquerading as evidence. They may also have set the NHS on a path which could result in its ultimate destruction if the Coalition government's plans come to fruition. Nigel Crisp is too loyal and too much of a gentleman to express a view either way. His swipe at the Coalition government's cack-handed NHS changes appears confused and muddled. He opines that the proposals, post-pause, lost their radical edge and are no longer fit for purpose. But they were deeply flawed to begin with and remain so.

Why, or for whom, the book is written remains something of a mystery. It is neither an insider's account nor a serious study of health system reform although is misleadingly packaged as falling into the textbook camp.

For those who were not around at the time or whose memory fails them, it was on Crisp's watch when the NHS moved almost overnight from being commended on its sound finances to becoming a basket case with the discovery of a revenue deficit of £0.5 billion. Crisp did the honourable thing and fell on his sword before having it thrust in him by then Prime Minister Blair but not before much agonising and delay.

Given the circumstances surrounding his departure Crisp might have been expected to produce a passionate account of his final days in Richmond House. It would certainly have made for a more gripping read. Instead, he has opted for a more detached and, it must be said, rather bland account of the challenges he and the NHS confronted.

The book is at its most entertaining when letting slip the occasional indiscretion. For example, Crisp insists that 'even the most senior and the most cynical can be touched by the magic and the power of high office'. They then promptly go home and bore their families and friends about it. Crisp was no exception stating unashamedly 'I certainly did'. If this doesn't make you squirm, what about the admission that as NHS CEO he 'barely noticed the WHO' since 'it was for enthusiasts and the specialists'. It rather begs the question of what qualities and aptitudes do we need and expect from the head poncho of one of the biggest and most complex organisations in the world. For a start, surely it needs to be someone with a grander vision and surer grasp of the global health policy scene. From the NHS's myopic focus on acute hospitals and beds you wouldn't think that non-communicable diseases account for 63% of the global disease burden.

The book catalogues a series of missed opportunities but presents them as if they were new, unexpected and outwith Crisp's influence. Service reconfiguration, hospital closures, shifting care out of hospital and into the community, managing long term conditions, tackling health inequalities, improving public health and rebalancing the NHS from a sickness to a health service are not new challenges – neither then nor now. They were on the policy agenda long before Crisp set foot in the Department of Health. Yet upon his departure, as he readily admits, these issues remained pretty much intact – a case of dynamics without change.

A strange detachment permeates the book reinforced by a format comprising short chapters with numbered conclusions and key points in boxes at the end of each which lend the text a pseudo-academic feel. It's as if it has been written by someone observing their own actions rather than actively living through and shaping them.

But this is no academic account either, making no pretence to be 'objective or comprehensive', settling for being 'accurate and truthful', and offering 'a unique and subjective view of the period'. But how honest the account is, as distinct from being a rather limp defence of Crisp's time in office, is arguable.

The book touches on lots of issues but for the most part superficially. Claims are made for the virtues of competition and choice without acknowledging the growing evidence which challenges such easy assumptions. When he does offer arguments against choice, he offers silly ones which do nothing to advance serious debate. Even when Crisp acknowledges that New Labour seemed only too willing to put at risk the provision of effectively run public services by encouraging markets and competition, it doesn't shake his belief that such a policy direction was the right one. Others beg to differ seeing a plot in all this to privatise the provision of health care.¹ Similarly, in extolling the value of targets while at the same time acknowledging the importance of viewing health care as a system, he ignores the criticisms of those who see a top-down, target-setting approach as irrational and anathema to improving complex systems.²

Star Rating: 2

References

1. Leys C, Player S. *The plot against the NHS*. Merlin Press, 2011.
2. Seddon J. *Systems thinking in the public sector*. Triarchy Press, 2008.